

CHAPTER 11

THE SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES GOVERNING CONTROVERSY

It seems clear that man is by nature a fighting animal. Wars recur between nations as soon as the people have recovered sufficient strength, and have had time partly to forget the horrors of the last struggle. The men who succeed in business are the men who love the fight of it. Politicians turn their disagreements into fights with as much unfairness and injustice as in actual warfare. Even games are all struggles, and most men cannot understand the pure pleasures of artistic achievement without any contest as to who wins.

This being the natural tendency of the flesh it is not surprising that the same fighting spirit is found in connection with religion. It need occasion no surprise if men who do not fight either with guns or fists, and who take no part in the struggles of politicians, are apt to be especially violent. It is certainly true that religious disputes have often resulted in a bitterness and uncharitableness more sinful than the errors which caused the strife to begin.

It is important therefore for us to remember the principles laid down in scripture for our guidance in these matters. If brethren could saturate their minds with the perfectly clear principles stated and reiterated in the Word, it might put an end to nearly all the destructive disputing, merely by the removal of all unnecessary provocation.

The first point to emphasize is the fact that strife and debate are treated as essentially evil things.

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Thus in writing to the Corinthians the apostle took the fact that there was envying, strife and division in the Church, as clear evidence that the members were still carnal minded: "For ye are yet carnal; for whereas there is among you envying and strife and division are ye not carnal and walk as men?" (1 Cor. 3 : 3).

In writing to the Galatians the same apostle includes strife in a list of evil things summarising the works of the flesh: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5 : 19-21).

Truly the word strife appears here in a terrible list of evils with a terrible penalty threatened. We do well to make a very critical examination of our own conduct to make sure that any variance, wrath and strife existing in the ecclesias now, shall not be aggravated by any wrong action or wrong words of ours.

In writing to Timothy the apostle Paul again denounces strife. He refers to the evils which come from strife of words and perverse disputings (1 Tim. 6 : 3-5). Then in the second letter he gives this positive instruction: "But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes; and the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meek-

ness instructing those who oppose themselves” (2 Tim. 3 : 23-25).

If anyone should raise the question how we can avoid strife in view of the wrong attitude taken by others, we surely have the answer in this positive instruction. If we are convinced that those who oppose us are doing wrong and that in faithfulness to the Truth we must contend with them, we have ready to hand a splendid test of our discipleship. We have an opportunity to be gentle, patient and meek in instructing those who oppose themselves. If these qualities could be cultivated all round it might soon be found that there was no need for any further argument. Wrongdoing would accept the necessary reproof and wrong thinking would be corrected. The apostolic method would remove all the fuel that feeds the destructive fire. The railing, striving and impatient disputing, the personal hits and retorts of the carnal mind, continuously add fuel to the fires of wrath until even some who try to obey the teaching of the Word may perish in the flames.

The apostle Paul gave us example as well as precept. After the position of the Gentiles had been determined there was still much prejudice among the Jews, causing difficulty for disciples who feared the criticism of men. The apostle Peter was at fault in withdrawing himself from some of the Gentile believers apparently as a concession to the prejudices of certain Jews who had recently come to him. The apostle Paul “withstood him to the face.” Fortunately we are told what he said: “If thou being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?”

Here was the essence of the argument forcibly but gently expressed. It truly showed an aptitude for teaching and meekly instructing, and it had the right effect.

It would have been possible to have brought a formidable indictment against the apostle Peter if one had cared to use carnal methods. He might have been reminded that he at one time had spoken against the idea of Christ dying at all, and had called forth a rebuke from the Master. At a later period he used the sword and had to be reproved again. Later still he forsook the Lord and denied him even with an oath. If in addition to the undoubted facts of Peter's weakness all derogatory reports regarding him and his associations had been collected, it might have seemed to the fleshly mind a crushing blow to the influence of Peter and all his connections.

We simply cannot imagine the apostle Paul using such methods. He was ever ready to remember his own dark past but not that of others. When it was necessary to reprove the brethren he did so with gentleness and patience. Though he had authority such as none of us possess, he "besought them by the mercies of God" (Rom. 12 : 1). He "besought them" to follow him (1 Cor. 4 : 16). He besought them by the meekness and gentleness of Christ (2 Cor. 10 : 1). He said: "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you, though the more abundantly I love you the less I be loved" (2 Cor. 12 : 15).

This was in writing to an ecclesia which was very faulty, and against which a very formidable accusation might have been made.

The whole tenor of the apostle's teaching is as outlined in the fifth and sixth chapters of the letter

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to the Galatians. We must overcome the flesh and all its works; we must bring forth the fruit of the spirit; but we must at the same time remember that we are all sinners who can only be saved through grace. Those who are spiritually minded must thus be ready to restore offenders in the spirit of meekness; considering themselves lest they also be tempted; bearing one another's burdens, and so fulfilling the law of Christ (Gal. 6 : 1-2).

There is further instruction regarding necessary controversy in the writing of the apostle Peter: "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: not rendering evil for evil or railing for railing: but contrariwise, blessing" (1 Peter 3 : 8-9). "Be ready to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (verse 15).

"All of you be subject one to another and be clothed with humility" (chapter 5 : 5).

Such instructions require emphasis in time of controversy, for then it is that we are in the greatest danger of forgetting them. We may be stung by an unfair criticism and we think of a crushing reply. The flesh would call it a righteous reproof, but Scripture calls it rendering railing for railing.

We are perhaps in a position to quote from a past utterance of an opponent, a cutting criticism of one of his present supporters. The quotation would not help or guide anyone a fraction of a degree in the right direction; but it might tend to cause division among those who do not agree with us. The flesh would call such a quotation skilful tactics; Scripture calls it sowing discord among brethren.

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It is easy for men to deceive themselves into thinking that unrighteous and unjust extremes are simply the evidence of their zeal for truth. Even a readiness to listen to the accused is regarded as weakness. Such extremists cry shame on the very effort to be fair, and in their determination to have no compromise with error they sometimes exaggerate faults, and so grossly misrepresent the objects of their attack that they become guilty of offences worse than all the error against which they are trying to fight.

We must not fall into the mistake of taking an extreme view even of the extremist. God has been merciful to such men in the past, and we must be merciful now even in our thoughts. We may state most emphatically, however, that it is wrong to exaggerate the faults of anyone or to find ugly and misleading names with which to label those who do not quite see eye to eye with us. It is quite possible to be valiant for the Truth and zealous for the Lord without being unfair even to those who are mistaken, and it is always wrong to be unfair. In faithfulness we must point out the danger that in great zeal for the jots and tittles of the law men may lose sight of the foundation principles. All their faith and works may become valueless through lack of charity.

The need for a clear perception of the scriptural principles governing controversy is shown by the tendency toward unrighteous exaggeration even on the part of those from whom better things would be expected. A few days ago we read some words written by a critic who has usually shown a sense of responsibility in the use of words. Yet there are exaggerations which tend to foster strife without the

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slightest suggestion as to the restitution of the offenders. It declares that the belittling of the commandments among us had become an open sin.

This is a very definite and severe judgment, which presumably includes the present writer in its sweeping condemnation. What does it mean? Is there any effort or desire to restore us "in the spirit of meekness", or are we too evil for that? If we "belittle the commandments of Christ" to the point of "open sin", what hope can we have of forgiveness unless we can be restored? I have just recently been through the four Gospel records in an attempt to classify all the commandments of the Lord Jesus and apply them to present experience. It is easy to find commands which are very imperfectly observed. The repeated command to love one another even as he has loved us (John 13 : 34) has been repeatedly broken. The commands not to lay up treasure on earth and not to seek the riches of the Gentiles are so foreign to the spirit of our age that we only grasp them with great difficulty, and so far no one has been found to rend the ecclesias on this issue. It is quite certain that our critic does not mean these matters. He probably refers to the vexed question of a decision as to where to draw the line between reproving, rebuking or withdrawing from an offender. Is there anything in the commands of Christ to suggest that one who takes too lenient a view of his brother's offences is to be condemned and repudiated? I know of no such command. There are plenty of warnings that those who take too severe a view of a brother's offences will themselves be dealt with severely. There are warnings against judging and against the natural tendency to see the

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defects in the eye of a brother while remaining unconscious of greater defects in ourselves. If some among us err in their unwillingness to take the most severe of all measures against offenders, if they carry too far the commands to be patient and to restore offenders in the spirit of meekness, it cannot in fairness be described as "belittling the commandments of Christ."

The use of this expression is to be explained in the same way as the many far worse attempts at argument which we sometimes hear. It is a natural emanation from strife and debate.

It is not fair, it is not true; but it has the doubtful merit of being severe, and therefore it is made to serve. It is so easy to be led into the use of such expressions, and we must not make any man an offender for a word, but we do well to sound a warning. Be pitiful, be courteous, be gentle, be meek, be honest. Cultivate charity and love, and remember that for every idle word that you speak you shall give account in the day of judgment.